

Efraim Karsh

Nowadays reasoned, calm political debate is as lost as Atlantis. In most societies. Positions are as polarized and as a result the views and opinions that circulate most and are read most, tend to be those of the extremes.

This was brought home to me recently after reading Efraim Karsh's latest book *The Tail Wags the Dog: International Politics and the Middle East*, in which he charts the course of the European powers' involvement in the Middle East from the nineteenth century until the present. He is a well known Israeli-British academic who has written several books on the history of the Middle East. He seeks to counter the one sided anti-Israel narrative that puts all the blame for the disastrous history of Arab nationalism and the Palestinians on Israel itself. As such, of course, he is reviled by the left but also disliked by the right, because he does see the other narrative and has no problem enumerating Israel's mistakes too.

His core thesis is that external powers cannot solve the problems of the Middle East. However much they may have meddled and intervened, by far the major cause of the backwardness, internecine killings, and rivalries that are keeping it in the Middle Ages are due overwhelmingly to internal rivalries and feuding.

"Middle easterners have always found it easier to blame others for their misfortunes. But the main culpability for the regions endemic malaise lies with local players...There was no Arab nation at the outset of the First World War. Only an intricate web of local loyalties to one's clan, tribe, village, town, religious sect or localized ethnic minority."

Of course, one could have said much the same of Europe before the middle of the nineteenth century. Not all civilizations march in lockstep. But sadly, where one world impinges on the other, one needs to respond in the present rather than wait for Divine intervention. The extreme nationalism on display in Israel simply mirrors the extreme Arab nationalism. Both sides fight the zero blame game.

The record of conflict and dysfunction goes back a long way. After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire during the First World War, the victorious European powers looked around to find a structure that would replace the Turks. They made two fundamental mistakes. The first was to quite arbitrarily carve up the area into completely new and illogical states in order to accommodate the power grab of Sharif Hussein of Mecca (the Hashemite dynasties) and his sons. Hussein claimed to be leading an Arab revolt against the Ottoman Turks, when in fact he represented no one but himself and his family. Britain, largely besotted with the British agent T.E.Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia), was gulled, together with France, into going along with his misrepresentations. Very similar to the way the United States was totally fooled into believing that Iraq would coalesce into modern democracy the moment Saddam Hussein was deposed.

The Husseinis were driven out of Mecca by internal rivalries, not external ones. And it was handed over to the rival tribe of Saud. Lawrence tried to get one son, Faisal, appointed over Lebanon and Syria. Both, as we see today, artificial and arbitrary concoctions of rival sects and religions. He was soon kicked out, and so they concocted another impossible country for him to rule—Iraq. Ignoring the conflicting demands of Kurds, Shia, and Sunni. The older son, Abdullah, was given Transjordan.

To complete the criminal idiocy, the British Mandate appointed another Hussein the Mufti of Jerusalem. He had fomented anti-Jewish riots in Palestine in which hundreds of Jews were killed and many more wounded during the 1920s, long before the State of Israel was founded or indeed the Holocaust (for those who fancy that these were the original sin). The Mufti in Jerusalem and Faisal's son in Iraq agitated for Arab nationalism and wooed the Nazis in the hopes of driving the Jews out of the Middle East.

For a period after the Second World War, secular Pan-Arabism looked to be taking over from backward religious fanaticism. However, its dictatorships, its failure to govern in an enlightened democratic manner, has led directly to the return of religious extremism. When nothing else works, look for a Messiah! This in turn has led to the current mad dreams of the Arab world resurrecting the Caliphate and returning to the borders it occupied over a thousand years ago, which included much of Europe.

Karsh is often portrayed as an extremist. But he is far more nuanced and moderate than most Arab spokesmen. Voices like al-Qaradawi (beloved of British left-wing politicians) proclaim, "Islam will return to Europe as a conqueror and victor after being expelled from it twice." Even the late Zaki Badawi, a man I knew and got on well with, said that one day the whole world will be one Muslim community. If one really wants find Jewish extremists there are plenty to choose from, but Karsh is hardly one of them.

Fortunately there are Muslim moderate voices too, like Hamza Yusuf, who are being supported and their views disseminated. A recent conference hosted by the King of Morocco has issued important declarations that propagate tolerance, coexistence, and moderation. Even the Saudis have begun to take steps in this direction. It is important to hear these voices every time some new barbarian calls for the destruction of Jews and of the West.

The evils of the Middle East are on the move. But, ironically, I am optimistic. Israel is well placed to take care of itself. The USA has its own social, immigration, and political issues to deal with. Europe is now grappling with a massive cultural upheaval that will keep it busy for generations, and the Arab world has to sort its own political and religious fissures to sort out. The UN, the Left, and opponents of Israel can huff and puff but can achieve nothing more than tokenism.

We live in a world where twisting the facts and lying are simply tools of warfare. Even bishops and academics throw around terms of abuse like Apartheid, Nazi, racist, and imperialist without a pause to examine the accuracy or historical meanings that prove how ignorant and malicious such epithets are when applied to Israel.

I only wish more people would read books like Efraim Karsh's to realize that to solve a problem requires honesty, which demands objectivity. And a condition of objectivity is balance.

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